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Language Loss and Illocutionary Silencing

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The twenty-first century will witness an unprecedented decline in the diversity of the world's languages. While most philosophers will likely agree that this decline is lamentable, the question of what exactly is lost with a language has not been systematically explored in the philosophical literature. In this paper, I address this lacuna by arguing that language loss constitutes a problematic form of illocutionary silencing. When a language disappears, past and present speakers lose the ability to realize a range of speech acts that can only be realized in that language. With that ability, speakers lose something in which they have a fundamental interest: their standing as fully empowered members of a linguistic community.

1. Introduction

Roughly seven thousand languages are currently spoken on our planet. By the end of the century, nearly half will have disappeared, victims of migration, urbanization, and other cultural and economic changes. Most philosophers will likely agree that, with each language that vanishes, something significant will be lost. The question of what exactly that something is, however, is not one that has received the attention it deserves in the philosophical literature.¹

In the popular press, the topic of language extinction is often introduced in connection with an appeal to the utility that each language might offer linguists as a data point.² Sometimes an analogy is drawn with the risk that a loss of diversity of biological species will cause us to miss out on potential drug discovery targets or other useful or

¹ To the extent that the question of language loss has been taken up by philosophers, it has typically been in connection with questions about the political rights of minority groups; see, for example, Taylor (1994), Kymlicka (1995, 2001), Van Parijs (2000), Patten (2001, 2005, 2009, 2019), and the contributions in Kymlicka and Patten (2003). While this is indisputably an important literature, the kinds of considerations that have been advanced in support of claims about minority rights and linguistic justice do not, as far as I can tell, really speak much to what is distinctive about language extinction.

² See, for example, Woodbury (n.d.) and Nuwer (2014). Indeed, this is an argument that appears in some scholarly work on the subject too; see Crystal (2000).

interesting substances. Although there are surely insights to be gained from studying a diverse range of languages, this kind of instrumental justification falls short in a number of ways. First of all, it is not obvious that the efforts of researchers to give an account of the basic mechanisms whereby linguistic strings are generated and processed will in fact depend on the specific details of any particular language. More fundamentally, by casting the value of a language in instrumental terms, the ‘needs of science’ response misses a strong intuition: other things being equal, it seems clear that something significant would be lost when an endangered language disappears, even if we knew beforehand that no feature of that language would unlock the secret to language in general.

Anthropologists and sociologists frequently offer arguments that track something more obviously worth attending to.³ One of these arguments involves pointing out that language loss is frequently the result of various forms of political and economic injustice and oppression. According to a related argument, language loss tends to co-occur with the assimilation of one culture by another—or worse, its total obliteration. Hence, in so far as we are worried about injustice and a diminishing diversity of cultures, we should worry about the loss of languages.⁴

It is not hard to imagine how these sorts of considerations might provide us with reasons to be troubled by the precarious state of many of the world’s languages. Nevertheless, as in the case of the ‘value to science’ response, the instrumental nature of these reasons passes over something that seems obvious: even if we could somehow guarantee equality and preserve a minority culture, there would still be much to lament if the language of the people involved were lost.⁵

My aim here will be to sketch a novel approach to the question of why we should be troubled by the progressive diminishing of the

³ For just a few examples drawn from a vast literature, see Day (1985), Sankoff (2002), and King and Haboud (2011).

⁴ Blake (2003) provides a philosophical argument for liberal language policies that takes this kind of injustice to be the key consideration involved in cases of language loss.

⁵ I can imagine someone objecting that my formulation separates things that should not or cannot really be separated. Maybe a language is an inalienable component of a culture; if so, then valuing the diversity of cultures might require valuing the diversity of languages. Anyone tempted by that line is invited to read the present argument as aiming to throw light on what exactly it is that makes a language culturally significant. On the line I will press here, the links between our cultural knowledge and our linguistic competence turn out to be both broader and deeper than philosophers typically acknowledge.

diversity of the world's languages. I begin by introducing a view of slurs and pejoratives that has been influential recently. On that view, versions of which have been defended by Lepore and Stone (2018), Nunberg (2018), and Díaz-Legaspe, Liu and Stainton (2019), the difference between a slur and a neutral counterpart expression is not a difference in meaning, but a difference in what Nunberg calls the 'linguistic metadata' associated with each expression.⁶ What make slurs repulsive, according to this analysis, are problematic facts about their previous use, like the fact that they are or were common among people who held abhorrent prejudices, or who advocated or perpetrated violence, injustice, or similar against the group targeted by the slur. Competent speakers who encounter slurs know these historical facts, at least at a high level of generality, and that knowledge allows them to recognize slurring speech for what it is.

Although I find this analysis of slurs attractive, I will not attempt to defend it here against competing proposals. What is important for my purposes is that the analysis suggests a way of thinking about language that reveals a point of broad significance: there are some speech acts whose identity depends crucially on fine-grained features of their particular mode of realization. By deploying data drawn from a wide variety of colloquial and literary sources, I will argue that understanding what someone is doing with her words often requires attending not just to what she says, but to *how* she says it. Interpreting a poem, for example, typically requires recognizing the overlapping layers of significance marked by a word, structure or metre with particular phonetic or prosodic properties or historical associations. If you change the words, their sound or their structure, you end up with a different poem.

It is a short step from here to the claim that there are certain speech acts whose identity depends on specific features of the language used to realize them. While a bilingual speaker might be able to express all of the same contents in English (say) as she can in her heritage language, I will argue that if no one else can speak that language, or if she is cut off from the community of speakers, she is deprived of the ability to activate the particular network of associations, historical and otherwise, that gives that language a distinctive character, and its speakers each a distinctive voice. Speech acts that depend on those associations are undermined, and thus speakers are silenced,

⁶ Pullum (2018) bears mentioning in this connection as well, although due to a difference in focus I will not discuss his work in detail here.

both literally and in the philosophical sense explicated by Langton (1993) and Hornsby (1995), as their heritage languages disappear.

In the final section of the paper, I turn my attention to the question of why this kind of silencing is problematic, and I consider some objections to the position I develop. I will claim that speakers of threatened languages are harmed when their languages disappear, because (i) humans have a fundamental interest in being fully empowered members of a speech community, and (ii) the silencing that occurs when languages are lost is silencing produced systematically and by unjust mechanisms; that is, it is silencing that people suffer in virtue of being part of disempowered communities.⁷ I close by acknowledging the worry that my proposal will overgenerate by entailing that any change in a language involves the loss of something valuable; I claim we can accept that all change does amount to the loss of something of value without enabling a *reductio*, since we are capable of discriminating between losses that are more and less significant.

2. Linguistic metadata and the identity of speech acts

2.1 *The history of a word shapes what can be done with it*

One of the central aims of the substantial philosophical literature on slurs is to explain what makes them problematic. The question is typically set up in terms of a distinction between slurring terms and an alleged class of expressions called ‘neutral counterparts’.⁸ While a slur and its counterpart are supposed to have the same extension (or putative extension), trading one for the other changes the nature of the speech act (or acts) that would (or could) be realized by means of a certain sentence. Compare:

- (1) (Neutral group designation) are *F*.
 - (a) North Americans are dumb.
 - (b) Germans are cruel.

⁷ Crucially, as I will show, the second point does not imply that the evil of silencing is just the same as the evil of economic or social inequality. An anonymous referee points out that in the silencing literature, it is typically held that illocutionary disablement ‘not only reflects but constitutes’ an injustice; I will argue that this standard is met in the case of language loss.

⁸ An anonymous referee points out that it is not obvious that all (or even any) slurs really have neutral counterpart expressions. Although I share the referee’s intuition, since the argument I will offer here does not require there to be such counterparts, I will not take a stand on the question of whether there really are any. I follow the standard dialectical approach from the literature when framing the issue simply for the sake of familiarity.

- (2) (Slur for the same group) are *F*.
 (a) Gringos are dumb.
 (b) Boches are cruel.

Sentences derived from template (1) express candidate truths; holding thorny questions about the interpretation of generics aside, such sentences will be true just in case members of the group in question tend to be *F*.⁹ Attitudes differ as to whether or not sentences derived from template (2) are candidates for expressing truths at all.¹⁰ People generally agree, however, that someone who utters a sentence derived from (2) thereby *disparages* members of the group targeted by the slur, and thus does something offensive or morally problematic.

Philosophers have sought to account for the difference between slurs and their neutral counterparts in a wide variety of ways. If we limit our attention to views on which sentences of both form (1) and (2) express truth-evaluable contents, the standard approach is to claim that slurs involve two distinct components of meaning. At one level, the slur and its neutral counterpart pick out the same property, like the property of belonging to a certain social group. What distinguishes the slur is that it additionally involves a further meaningful element that encodes something problematic.¹¹ To mention just a few of the prominent alternatives here, some philosophers take this element to involve content, some think it should be treated presuppositionally, and some think that the problem is due to a conventional implicature.¹²

⁹ Sentences involving generic noun phrases are the focus of a substantial literature. 'Dogs have tails' seems intuitively true, although not every dog has a tail. Many people will accept 'Sharks are dangerous', even though most sharks are not dangerous. A wide variety of semantic and pragmatic proposals have been advanced to explain what threshold of *F*s (or what kind of prototypical *F*s) must be *G* in order for sentences of the form '*F*s are *G*' to be true in a context; for a representative sample, see Carlson (1995), Leslie (2007), Leslie and Gelman (2012), Sterken (2015), and others.

¹⁰ For arguments against the idea that slurring statements are truth evaluable, see, for example, Richard (2008), DiFranco (2015) for arguments against the idea that slurring statements are truth evaluable.

¹¹ In this regard, much of the contemporary discussion follows the broad contours of Frege's distinction between one component of the meaning of an expression that properly contributes to the thoughts it can be used to express and another component which contributes a 'tone', 'colour' or 'shading' (Frege 1918/1956).

¹² Gibbard (2003), for example, holds that slurs are like the 'thick' ethical concepts described by Williams (1985) in involving an attribution of group membership, together with the expression of an evaluative attitude towards the group. Hom (2008) says that slurs pick out a complex property constructed from prescriptions for treatment (for instance, 'should be subject to higher standards in university admissions') together with racist

Anderson and Lepore (2013) offer a theory that breaks with the standard picture by denying that the offensiveness of slurs is best explained in terms of their meaning in the first place. For them, a slur means exactly what its neutral counterpart does; it is simply a designation for a group. On their view, the extension of 'Boche' is just whatever the extension of 'German' is. What makes the slur problematic, they claim, is the metalinguistic fact that there is a general social prohibition on using it.

While many philosophers have pointed out problems for this view, the idea that the problematic nature of slurs might be due, not to facts about their meaning, but to background facts about their pattern of use, has been at the heart of several prominent recent contributions to the literature. Lepore and Stone (2018), Nunberg (2018) and Díaz-Legaspe, Liu and Stainton (2019) have all defended versions of this idea. Compare the following passage from Nunberg:

I'll argue that *redskin* is distinguished from *Indian* not by any additional evaluative or expressive features of its meaning, but merely in being the description of Indians prescribed by the conventions of a group whose members have disparaging attitudes about American Indians. Then the implications of pointedly choosing to use *redskin* arise not from the meaning of the word but from its association with the discourse of a certain group of speakers.

In a nutshell: racists don't use slurs because they're derogative; slurs are derogative because they're the words that racists use. (Nunberg 2018, p. 244)

In this passage, Nunberg distinguishes the implications of someone's choice to use the expression 'redskin' from the metalinguistic fact that 'redskin' is an expression used by racists. Where the nature of the speech acts that can be realized using 'redskin' is concerned, however, it is this latter fact that bears the explanatory weight. Regardless of a speaker's intentions on a particular occasion, or indeed of her familiarity with the history of the expression, Nunberg's view is that a person who uses 'redskin' disparages Native Americans. Why?

ideological descriptions (for instance, 'because they are so good at maths') and attributions of group membership couched in neutral terms (for instance, 'because their ancestors came from the most populous East Asian country'). Potts (2007) and Williamson (2010) say that slurs make the same truth-conditional contributions as their counterparts, but conventionally implicate something bad. And Schlenker (2007) says the bad thing is a presupposition.

Because ‘redskin’ is an expression that has historically or paradigmatically been used by people who disparage Native Americans.¹³

This use of metalinguistic facts to explain the problematic nature of slurs raises the question of how finely-grained our characterization of those facts, and thus of the speech acts such expressions can be used to perform, should be. Although I am not aware of anyone who has defended such a view, it is easy to see that there is theoretical space available to claim that understanding what speakers do with slurs requires only a relatively coarse-grained characterization of the relevant metalinguistic facts, and thus of the relevant speech acts.¹⁴ On this sort of position, a slur would be an expression whose past was bad enough, or whose offensive uses were widespread enough, to taint it with the metadata tag ‘I am a slur’; competence with the expression would require knowing that it is a slur, but not necessarily knowing its history in any detail.

Díaz-Legaspe, Liu and Stainton (2019) offer a view that characterizes various slurring expressions (and non-slurs, as well) with regard to a variety of different ‘register features’. On their view, a fully competent user of an expression will not just know whether it is a slur or not, but will understand where on a scale of offensiveness it falls (if it is a slur), and will understand a variety of facts about its typical pattern of use, such as whether it is a regionalism, or a term only appropriately directed at or employed by older or younger speakers, and so on. (This point applies not just to slurs, but to a wide variety of expressions that are marked for register.)

Lepore and Stone (2018) and Nunberg (2018) defend still more particularized views, on which to be a fully competent user of a slurring expression, you must not only know that the word is a slur, or know how offensive a slur it is compared to others, but furthermore, know something about the particular historical circumstances from which the slur’s contemporary use descends. For Lepore and Stone, the offensiveness of the anti-Semitic slur ‘kike’, for example, is bound up with historical facts about anti-Semitism. The history of anti-Semitic prejudice is probably long enough and vile enough to guarantee that ‘kike’ would be a slur even if the events of the Holocaust had never taken place. The fact that the Holocaust *did* occur, however,

¹³ Note that this strategy does not involve a problematic regress. As noted by, for example, Anderson and Lepore (2013), it is possible to insult and disparage someone without using a word that is marked as insulting or disparaging. If the practice of using a certain word to disparage catches on, the word may come to be associated with metadata it previously was not.

¹⁴ On some ways of unpacking this idea, the resulting view might end up bearing substantial resemblance to the position described by Anderson and Lepore (2013).

is implicated in making speech acts realized with the expression the speech acts they are. In Lepore and Stone's terms, the 'tone' of the expression 'kike', as used today, reflects the history of systematic anti-Semitic violence from the middle of the twentieth century; people who use the expression activate that history, and people who encounter the expression recognize as much.

Nunberg, along similar lines, says that 'by affiliating himself with the historical owners of [a slur], the speaker doesn't simply evoke the word's background but materially obtrudes it into the context' (Nunberg 2018, p. 286). He illustrates the point with the following passage from Langston Hughes's autobiography:

The word *nigger* sums up for us who are colored all the bitter years of insult and struggle in America: the slave-beatings of yesterday, the lynchings of today, the Jim Crow cars, the only movie show in town with its sign up FOR WHITES ONLY, the restaurants where you may not eat, the jobs you may not have, the unions you cannot join. The word *nigger* in the mouths of little white boys at school, the word *nigger* in the mouth of the foreman at the job, the word *nigger* across the whole face of America! (Hughes 1940/2002, pp. 205–6)

If we accept this kind of fine-grained characterization of the metadata that are associated with slurs, and thus of the particular speech acts they can be used to realize, it is a short step to the conclusion that there will be speech acts realizable in a certain language that can only be realized in that language.¹⁵ While no one would deny that it is possible in our world as it is to disparage Afro-Ecuadorians using expressions with a problematic history in Ecuadorian Spanish, the particular kind of derogative acts thus realized will turn out to be importantly different from the kind people speaking American English realize when they use the *n*-word. To understand exactly what someone does when they disparage someone using that word, you have to know something about its particularly problematic history.¹⁶ For the same reason, in order to *do* what someone does when they use that word, you have to use that word.

¹⁵ It is important to distinguish metadata that speakers can be reasonably assumed to mutually know, and thus deploy for the purposes of realizing speech acts, from metadata that are of use only to the lexicographer. So, for example, while every English speaker can be expected to recognize certain general facts about the relative frequencies of familiar lexical alternatives, only a very few will know anything about the absolute frequency with which a word occurs in the English corpus. Facts of the former sort, but not the latter, are relevant in determining the speech act possibilities associated with a certain expression. Thanks to Robert Stainton and an anonymous referee for discussion of this point.

¹⁶ To be clear, there are different senses in which someone can count as knowing what someone else is doing with her words. You can recognize that someone is insulting you

It is important to emphasize that I do not mean any of the foregoing to suggest that slurring is a form of speech that deserves protection, or that the particular inventory of slurs that different languages make available is a valuable part of the expressive richness of the human inventory.¹⁷ I have put slurs in a prominent place in the discussion because slurs, in virtue of their unfortunate power, provide a particularly striking example of a fact I take to be perfectly general: the history of a particular expression constrains the space of the speech acts that can be realized by means of that expression.

Once we realize the significance of this point, it becomes clear that there are basic interpretative tasks that require a more fine-grained characterization of speech acts than traditional speech act theory provides. In many cases, to properly appreciate what someone is doing with her words, we have to attend to more than what Searle (1975) called the illocutionary force and the propositional content thereby expressed. We have to attend, furthermore, to the *manner* in which the speech act in question is realized.¹⁸

Often, facts about the manner in which a speech act is realized—facts that matter where the question ‘What speech act was this?’ is concerned—are facts that depend on the idiosyncrasies of a particular language. We have just looked at an example of one way in which those idiosyncrasies are manifest: history. In the rest of this section, I will consider other sources of cross-linguistic variation, and we will see how the various sources are interwoven to further magnify the differences between languages. We will see, that is, how people are able

without seeing how exactly the insult works, for example, because you do not know what one of the words involved means. Although there is no space here to develop and defend the point, it is plausible to think that linguistic competence comes in degrees, and that language users with the highest degree of competence will recognize the fine-grained and not just the broad classes of the speech acts they encounter.

¹⁷ This is not to say that there is nothing valuable in the vicinity; it may sometimes be the case that the harm wrought by slurs plays a significant role in making possible the kind of solidarity that can be reinforced by way of a reclaimed slur. See Bianchi (2014), Ritchie (2017) and Jeshion (2018) for discussion. I imagine that few people would be tempted to claim that, all things considered, the good made possible by reclamation makes it worth having slurs around.

¹⁸ There is a sense in which philosophers working in the tradition descended from Grice (1975) all pay a lot of attention to the manner in which a speech act is performed. The point here, however, is that manner is relevant to determining the identity of a speech act in a more direct and fundamental way than simply by determining the conversational implicatures it generates. I imagine that this fact will seem obvious to literary theorists, comedians, playwrights, and the person in the street, but it seems not to occupy nearly as prominent a place in the philosophy of language as it should.

to exploit mutually known facts about the conventional distinctions the language makes, about phonetic and semantic similarities certain expressions bear to others in the language, about register and frequency, and so on, to *do* different things with words. While a translation of the expressions used to realize a certain speech act might preserve some of the features that made an act the act it was, there are many cases in which important properties of a piece of discourse—properties that help to determine which speech acts it might be used to realize—do not survive translation. While there may be an expression available in the language in which the translation is rendered that matches the original expression in terms of its content, say, or even content and register, there will not generally be an expression that is a feature-for-feature analogue where the full range of metadata is concerned. This means that speech acts which leverage those metadata cannot be realized in translation. The best way to make the significance of this point clear is to walk through some examples.

2.2 Different languages conventionalize different things

Differences in the inventories of conventional tools that different languages make available provide one important source of cross-linguistic variation in terms of possible speech acts.¹⁹ Examples from poetry illustrate this point nicely. Consider, for example, the following declaration made by the lyrical subject of José Hernández's *Martín Fierro*, which relies on a conventional device from Spanish which English lacks:

- (3) Yo soy toro en mi rodeo. Y torazo en rodeo ajeno ...
 I am bull in my rodeo. And big.bull in rodeo of.another ...
 'I am the bull in my own herd, and a braver bull in the next one ...'
 (Hernández 1872/1967, p. 7).

This line illustrates how an author writing in Spanish is able to exploit derivational morphology to do something that an English author or translator cannot. The point of the line is to establish a contrast, between the properties the lyrical subject is understood to instantiate at home and those instantiated when away. By using two instances of the same word root—*toro/torazo*—to establish the contrast, however, the author calls as much attention to that which is constant across the two contexts as to that which changes. On a natural reading, we understand that the lyrical subject swells into a more substantial

¹⁹ For an argument that aims to establish that even such high-level speech acts types as promising and asserting depend on the evolution of conventional markers, see Stainton (2016).

version of himself when away; the changes are changes in degree, not of kind. This interpretation is reinforced in the following stanza by the lines ‘Con los blandos yo soy blando / Y soy duro con los duros’, which we might render roughly as ‘I am good-natured with those of a good nature, and unforgiving with the unforgiving’.

By focusing on a single property—bravery—Catherine Ward’s English translation obscures this reading. We might attempt to bring it out by replacing ‘a braver bull’ with ‘more of a bull’, or something similar. Crucially, however, there is no way of doing so in English that preserves the effect wrought by the derivational form, wherein we literally see reduplication and expansion in the words used to express the idea of growth.²⁰

Another prominent source of conventional variation across languages concerns forms of politeness. It is common for European languages, for example, to distinguish between a formal and an informal second-person form of address. As an anonymous referee notes, Japanese distinguishes between many more levels of familiarity than European languages do, and I have written elsewhere about politeness in Korean, which involves at least seven, and possibly several more, levels of formality.²¹

While there is no question that English speakers can distinguish formal or polite speech from informal, marking the distinctions by means of lexical choice, syntax and intonation, the fact that certain languages conventionalize these roles allows for new speech act possibilities. There is something important that speakers of Japanese and Korean can do—and speakers of French and Russian, to a lesser extent—that speakers of most contemporary versions of English cannot.²² They can employ a *conventional* device that their language

²⁰ Mike Martin has pointed out that the translator may have elected for ‘braver’ because the alliteration recreates some of the effect of the derivational morphology of the original. In my mind, this underscores the point that the translator is forced to make choices about which approximation is the best approximation; there is no way for her to do in English all of the various things the Spanish original does, that is, no equivalent construction that has the same architecture of content, sound, structure, and so on.

²¹ I ignore differences between politeness and formality here. Interestingly, Korean requires speakers to choose between conventional forms that track, not just the relation between speaker and addressee, but also between speaker and topic of conversation. In addition to politeness, these choices in Korean also reflect a variety of family and gender roles, which allows for a set of subversive possibilities that languages which do not conventionalize these roles do not. I discuss these subversions in more detail in Nowak (forthcoming).

²² The Editors note that there are English dialects that preserve a parallel distinction in the pronoun system, pointing to Yorkshire as an example.

makes available for the express purpose of situating themselves vis-à-vis their interlocutors. Where the level of politeness is concerned, they can (and indeed must) haul up a flag, as it were, that is available to every speaker of the language and immediately recognizable by every speaker of the language.

In several places in his work, Aleksandr Pushkin exploits the grammatical requirement that politeness be marked in Russian on a two-point scale to a poetic—and speech-act-theoretic—end. Consider, for example, Tatiana's letter from *Eugene Onegin*, at chapter 3, verse 32. For most of the letter, and indeed her previous speech in general, Tatiana addresses Onegin using the polite second-person form of address. At line 34, however, she slips into the familiar form, which she repeats fifteen times before returning to the formal just once when closing at line 78. In his commentary on the text, Nabokov (1975b) indicates that Pushkin was deploying a familiar technique from contemporary French epistolary novels (there are textual reasons to think that Tatiana would know these novels—could her slip have been affected?). In translation, both Nabokov (1975a) and Falen, whose version of *Onegin* (Pushkin 2009) is one of the most widely read in English, mark the Russian transition from *vy* to *ty* by rendering Tatiana's first use of *ty* as 'thine':

Другой!.. Нет, никому на свете
Не отдала бы сердца я!
То в вышнем суждено совете...
То воля неба: я твоя;
Вся жизнь моя была залогом
Свиданья верного с тобой;
Я знаю, ты мне послан богом,
До гроба ты хранитель мой...

(Pushkin 1959b, p. 69)

Another! No! In all creation
There's no one else whom I'd adore
The heavens chose my destination
And made me thine for evermore!
My life till now has been a token
In pledge of meeting you, my friend;
And in your coming, God has spoken
You'll be my guardian till the end ...

(Pushkin 2009, p. 74)

Few English readers are likely to notice the distinction between ‘thee’ and ‘you’, much less to recognize that it is meant to realize an emotional transition, a headlong rush from formality to intimacy. Sometimes, English translations of the poem and others that employ the same technique are accompanied by a note that reminds readers that archaic English distinguished the formal ‘you’ from the informal ‘thee’.²³ When the poem is read in light of such notes, English readers can vaguely see how the structure is meant to work. But this is like the sense in which it is possible to appreciate why a joke that you have failed to understand the first time around would have been funny if you had understood properly. That is not the sense tellers of jokes are after when they tell jokes, and it is not the sense a poet or translator would aim for, given the choice. The gap between the effect the modern English reader understands is meant to be felt and the effect that is in fact produced by the alternation between ‘you’ and ‘thee’ simply has no analogue in most varieties of contemporary English. After one instance of ‘thee’, both Nabokov and Falen give up and render the remaining instances of *ty* as ‘you’, and neither marks Tatiana’s return to *vy* at the end of her letter.

To show how the structural similarities between Russian and French—both languages that distinguish between informal and formal second-person forms of address—allow for a more faithful reproduction, it is instructive to compare a French version of Tatiana’s letter which Nabokov offers in the commentary that accompanies his English translation. For the first several stanzas of the letter, Nabokov translates Tatiana’s second-person addresses to Onegin using *vous*. At line 34, however, where her Russian *vy* becomes *ty*, the French pronoun inventory makes *tu* available, which allows the contrast to be marked:

Un autre! ... Non, à nul autre au monde
je n’aurais donné mon cœur!
C’est ainsi qu’en a décidé le conseil d’en-haut,
c’est la volonté du ciel: je suis à toi.
Ma vie entière fut le gage
de notre rencontre certaine;
Dieu t’envoie à moi, je le sais;
Tu seras mon gardien jusqu’à la tombe...

(Nabokov 1975b, p. 388)

²³ See, for example, Pushkin’s 1828 ‘Ty i vy’, in Pushkin (1959a, p. 207), translated as ‘Thou and You’ in Pushkin (1999, p. 75). In Nowak (2019), I use that poem to make the same point.

In summary, languages differ widely in terms of the range of conventional tools they make available. We have looked at examples involving derivational morphology and scales of politeness, but different languages feature conventional devices that track a tremendous variety of different properties.²⁴ Since differences in the inventory of conventional devices amount to differences in the space of possible modes of action, this means that different languages make a tremendous variety of different speech acts possible.

2.3 *Overlapping features are part of our everyday linguistic lives*

Examples drawn from poetry provide a particularly clear illustration of the way in which the space of things we can do with our words depends on the way our language is set up. The identity of a verse is constituted not just by its propositional content, if such there be, but by its syntactic, lexical, morphological and phonological features, among other things. Poetic language invites reflection by calling attention to itself, demanding that we treat form as content. Crucially, however, the linguistic self-consciousness and exploitation of multiple overlapping sources of significance that we typically associate with poetry is in fact a pervasive feature of our linguistic practice.

To see this, consider a case that bridges the gap between literature and our everyday spoken lives. Commentators reacting to Russian president Vladimir Putin's decision to erect a 17-metre monument to the medieval Russian Orthodox Saint Vladimir joked on Twitter:

- (4) Putin pamyatnik sebe vozdvig nerukotvornyi!
 Putin monument to.himself erected untouched.by.hands
 'Putin erected himself a monument untouched by human hands.'

This formulation is designed to echo a declaration made by the lyrical subject of Pushkin's 'Exegi monumentum':

- (5) Ya pamyatnik sebe vozdvig nerukotvornyi!
 I monument to.myself erected untouched.by.hands
 'I erected myself a monument untouched by human hands.'

²⁴ An anonymous referee points out that, in addition to the devices we have considered here, languages differ substantially in terms of the way in which lexical distinctions are drawn. In many cases, these differences will lead to different speech act possibilities along the lines developed here. Colour terms, for example, like the Russian *sinnyi/goluboi* pair, which together represent the space picked out in English by 'blue', have been the subject of substantial discussion. See Gleitman and Papafragou (2005) for a survey of the issues raised by these and related data. Díaz-Legaspe, Liu and Stainton (2019) discuss a number of expressions whose significance is best characterized in terms of what they call 'use-theoretic' meanings, like 'gezundheit' and 'welcome'; languages differ widely in terms of the kinds of situations that are tracked by conventional devices of this sort.

Students of the Russian poetic corpus will know that at the end of ‘Exegi monumentum’, the lyrical subject claims the monument he creates by means of the poem will stand taller than and endure longer than a famous monument to Aleksandr I. Such readers will recognize comparisons, then, between Putin and Pushkin, and between Putin and Aleksandr I, in addition to the comparison with Horace’s *Odes* evoked by the title and reinforced throughout the poem by thematic similarities.²⁵

Even without the benefit of the literary background, however, (4) wears its satirical status on its sleeve. The atypical syntax and the low-frequency, high-register words *vozdvig* and *nerukotvornyi* convey a sense of grandiloquent irony. This sense will be lost on no one who speaks Russian; if you do not know that words like these are only used in lofty proclamations, you have missed something. Fully competent speakers, in other words, will recognize that the words involved in this string are tagged with metadata like [archaic] and [high-register].

We can try to recreate the effect of the Russian in English by explicitly pointing out the connections between Pushkin’s original and the netizen’s permutation. Again, however, as anyone who has ever mangled a joke will know, something’s admitting of an explanation as to why it would be funny is not the same as its being funny. The author of (4) relies on her target audience’s familiarity with the facts about syntactic and lexical register in order to send a crucial signal about what she is doing—satirizing. The action would not be the action it is if the audience could not be counted on to recognize those facts.

For another example of the way in which the speech act possibilities associated with an expression depend on the particular constellation of content and metadata it encodes, consider a case Lepore and Stone mention, but do not discuss in detail.²⁶ Andrew O’Hehir, writing for *Salon*, offers the following take on the word ‘niggardly’:

Should we stop using the adjective ‘niggardly,’ because it accidentally resembles another word?

²⁵ It is worth emphasizing here that the poet very clearly takes the poem to be a speech act; the monument he fashions is constituted by the words that make up the poem and their structure, and is explicitly intended to make his greatness evident. See §3 below for further discussion.

²⁶ Here I repeat my discussion of this case from Nowak (2019, p. 318).

That one is instructive, in a way. Along with roughly 100 percent of the media, I thought that controversy was ludicrous when it came up in the late '90s and early 2000s: If we consult the dictionary, we learn that 'niggardly' can be traced back to Middle English and Old Norse, and has no etymological connection to the racial slur. But I have to say that my perspective has since shifted. We pretty much have dumped that word, because it is so easily misunderstood and other words will do, and also because it carries a permanent taint: The only person who would conceivably use it now would be a snickering, anti-p.c. asshole trying to make an obnoxious point. (O'Hehir 2015)²⁷

Suppose you are watching a televised debate with a friend who does not speak English. One of the parties to the debate, a nationalist candidate, uses the word 'niggardly' to describe his opponent's approach to veteran's affairs. You snort derisively. Your friend, who is following the subtitles in her own language, is surprised and asks why. While it might be right, at a high level of generality, to say that the speaker has done something offensive, that response would not quite explain your reaction. Of course, in some contexts, derision might be an appropriate reaction to offensive behaviour—we might expect a certain level of decency from public figures, and take them to be worthy of scorn when they fail to live up to the expected standard by saying offensive things.

In this case, however, there is really more to the story. Speakers with the highest degree of competence in English will recognize not simply that the speech act realized was offensive, but that it was offensive in a highly particular way—in precisely the way a liberal listener would expect from a 'snickering, anti-p.c. asshole trying to make an obnoxious point'.²⁸ In virtue of what do we recognize this? Your friend,

²⁷ Several members of the *Mind* editorial team report not sharing O'Hehir's intuitions about the pattern of use associated with 'niggardly', and raise the possibility that the word may be associated with different patterns of use in British and American English. My reaction as an American patterns with O'Hehir's, but it is important to flag the possibility of divergence here.

²⁸ Importantly, I am not saying that the negative evaluation of the speaker on the part of the interpreter is entailed by the speech act in question. The nationalist candidate's supporters will detect in his speech a refreshing openness, a tweaking of the nose of the politically correct opposition. The important thing to notice here is that part of competence with English is knowing about the metadata associated with the lexical items and syntactic structures of English. So regardless of what you think of this act, you recognize the difference between it and the variation that would have been realized had 'niggardly' been replaced with 'stingy' or 'miserly', or whatever. The liberal listener and the nationalist listener can disagree about whether the point is obnoxious or not, but they will both recognize that it involves a transgression.

surprised at the specificity of a description like this, might point out that the subtitles offered only ‘My opponent’s treatment of our honoured veterans has been ungenerous’, which seems perfectly neutral.

At some level of description, the translator has got things right. The speech act in question is an assertion. Its content is precisely the content reported by the translation. The translation misses out, however, on a constellation of properties that are tagged in the metadata associated with ‘niggardly’, metadata that fully competent speakers are familiar with, and that fully competent speakers exploit in speaking and in interpreting one another. O’Hehir does a good job tracking many of the relevant properties in the passage quoted above; one is that ‘niggardly’ is an extremely low-frequency and antiquated expression, another is that it is phonetically uncomfortably similar to the n-word. More subtly, but no less importantly, there is the fact that we have other words in English that we can use to express the truth-conditional contribution ‘niggardly’ would express.

Of course, all of this information could be imparted to someone who did not know English. Sometimes, in fact, subtitles will feature explanations of jokes or innuendos that depend on phonetic features of the target language, or register facts, or exploit other kinds of linguistic metadata. Explaining how something is done, however, is a different thing from doing it. In order to be offensive in exactly the way the politician who says ‘niggardly’ is offensive—to be offensive by deploying a word that looks and sounds like the n-word and is almost never used because of that fact, but that means what ‘stingy’ or ‘miserly’ do—you have to be speaking English.²⁹

The self-conscious exploitation of the particular cluster of semantic, syntactic and phonetic features associated with a certain string is common to a wide variety of kinds of linguistic activity. For a final example, consider the case of commercial communication, as evidenced by the following street advertisement created by the London firm Bartle Bogle Hegarty:

²⁹ Although I have focused my discussion on the metadata associated with an expression, the key idea is that the identity of the speech act is determined by the precise set of overlapping features of various sorts associated with the words used to realize it. One of those features, of course, is the semantic content the word expresses. If ‘niggardly’ had meant what ‘regally’ means, the example might not work the way it does. The positive evaluative valence would presumably defeat the invocation of the n-word.



To a speaker of American English, who expects ‘fillet’ to rhyme with ‘ballet’, this copy will be baffling. In England, however, where ‘fillet’ rhymes with ‘billet’, this is the kind of thing you get when you contract a top-tier advertising agency to sell a chicken sandwich formed from two pieces of meat. While no one will be tempted to call this a speech act of great cultural significance, it is just as clear that it would not be the act it is were it not for certain facts about the language used to realize it, facts which every speaker of the local dialect can be assumed to know.

2.4 Totting up

If the foregoing considerations are on the right track, there are speech acts whose identity depends on the particular words and structures used to realize them. On one prominent treatment of slurring expressions, recognizing the particular kind of derogation realized by means of a slur requires understanding something about the social history from which the slur emerged; aspects of that history are encoded in the metadata associated with the word. In cases drawn from both literature and colloquial speech, we have seen how recognizing which speech acts are at issue requires recognizing, not just the

meanings of the words used, but specific facts about the way in which those meanings interact with a pattern of other features, like their sounds, relative frequencies, history of prominent past use, and so on.

Since the particular cluster of features associated with a word in one language is specific to that language, speech acts that exploit the relationship between multiple features will depend for their identity on the language in which they are realized. There are things you can do in Spanish, in other words, that you cannot do in English. The lyrical subject of *Martín Fierro* compares himself to a bull. I can also compare myself to a bull. I can even compare myself to a bull in an alliterative way that evokes some of the repetition of the Spanish original. But I cannot compare myself to a bull in exactly the way that the lyrical subject of the poem does, because his comparison involves a feature of Spanish that English lacks. Similarly, you can sell chicken sandwiches in other languages. You can even sell them using puns. But you cannot sell them using a pun that rhymes 'fillet' with 'fill it', unless those words mean what they do in your other language, and also have the same sounds.

To be clear, this is not to suggest that there is any high-level type of speech act, like refusing or permission-granting, that is specific to a certain language. The claim instead is that in addition to the utility of thinking of speech acts as belonging to one or another type at this high level of generality, there are also reasons to individuate them more finely, for example, reasons to think that comparing oneself to a bull by exploiting a certain feature of Spanish derivational morphology is a subtype of the more general speech act of comparing oneself to a bull, which is itself a subtype of a range of more general classes of speech acts still (such as comparing and asserting).

Before moving on to look at what this claim about language-specific speech acts has to do with the phenomenon of language loss, I want to address an objection. An anonymous referee wonders whether the considerations advanced here really support the idea that languages make particular speech act subtypes available,³⁰ as opposed to making certain perlocutionary effects possible at all, or to making them more or less easily possible.

³⁰ By 'speech act subtypes' I have in mind speech acts individuated with the fineness of grain I have insisted on here. So, if refusing is a type of speech act, I claim that we can usefully distinguish types of that act that will be distinguished by fully competent speakers of the language in which the refusal is realized, for example, refusing *by* using such-and-such a word, with such-and-such a salient history.

I think the referee is right that there may be perlocutionary effects that are only realizable in a particular language, or more easily realized in one language than in another. In the case of a poem, for example, it seems plausible to think that there is a type of aesthetic experience the poem produces which is fairly stable across readers, but which is nevertheless distinguishable from their evaluations of it, or from other more particular subjective experiences that it is implicated in generating. A certain combination of words might have a certain sonorous quality that we all recognize, for example, even if we differ about whether it is pleasant, and even if it evokes different memories for us. By the same token, the kinds of rhetorical strategies that will be psychologically effective in getting a certain content across might vary across languages in interesting ways.

The idea that the expressive possibilities offered by a certain language might influence the perlocutionary effects that can be (more or less easily) realized in that language is surely an important one, and may itself provide reasons for valuing the diversity of languages.³¹ But that point involves a different phenomenon from the one I am focused on here. Regardless of whether people have broadly similar aesthetic responses to a poem or not, there is an indisputable stability to at least a certain subset of their intellectual reactions, that is, to the reactions that they have simply in virtue of being speakers of English. You can like what a poet is doing in a poem or not like what she is doing, or be moved or unmoved, or be reminded of a certain moment in your life or not, but there is one thing you cannot avoid if you are a fully competent speaker of English: you cannot avoid recognizing *that* the poet is doing something that involves a certain precise constellation of facts about meaning, sound, shape, and so on. By the same token, whether you think the speaker deserves censure or praise, whether you find the statement sophomoric or refreshing, if you are a fluent speaker of idiomatic English, you cannot help but see that someone who uses ‘niggardly’ instead of ‘stingy’ or ‘miserly’ thereby *does* something different.

This kind of recognition, however, is one of the hallmarks of an illocutionary act—see Grice (1957), who, to put things crudely, held that what it is to assert that *P* is to utter a sentence with the intention of getting someone to recognize your intention that the utterance

³¹ Indeed, research on the different perlocutionary possibilities that are available to native and non-native speakers of a language provide an important reason for caring about the extent to which people are given the opportunity to present themselves in their native language; see Van Parijs (2000) and Ayala (2015) for related discussion.

represent that *P*. Although I do not mean to claim that each of the choices that goes into the construction of the poem expresses a determinate propositional content in the way an assertion does, it would be hard to deny that many of those choices involve the same structure of intention and recognition that is typical of speech acts. To put the point another way: the kind of ‘perlocutionary effect’ I take to be produced by the examples I am interested in is an intellectual one, the recognition of a certain kind of intention on the part of the speaker. To call this sort of intellectual achievement a mere perlocutionary effect, however, is simply to collapse the distinction between perlocutionary effects and the kind of uptake that makes an illocutionary act an illocutionary act.

3. Silencing, loss, and harm

Langton (1993) and Hornsby (1995), drawing on MacKinnon (1987, 1993), famously argue that certain especially troubling forms of pornography can bring about the illocutionary silencing of women, by making certain classes of speech act impossible to perform. On their view, this silencing is a result of the fact that such pornography undermines what Austin (1962) called the ‘uptake condition’ on speech acts, according to which a certain kind of audience reaction is a necessary condition on an act’s counting as a speech act of the intended type, or even counting as a speech act at all.³² A man who is used to seeing depictions of certain kinds of sexualized violence might hear a woman utter the word ‘no’, but fail to recognize that her utterance was intended as a refusal. In such a case, the utterance would in fact fail to *be*

³² Exactly what kind of reaction is required from an audience, or whether a reaction should really be required at all, is a contentious question. We have already considered one case here—the case of slurring—which suggests that an audience’s recognition of the speaker’s intention to realize a certain speech act cannot be a necessary condition on the act’s being the act it is. (In fact, the case of slurring suggests that the speaker’s intention will sometimes be immaterial as well.) Bird (2002) offers a range of cases that make the same point. A particularly illustrative example from his discussion is the case of lying; surely, he argues, it cannot be a requirement on some utterance’s counting as a lie that hearers recognize it as a lie. While this must be right, I take it that Bird’s interlocutors could agree, but deflect the force of the criticism by claiming that what the observation shows is simply that the uptake conditions on some speech acts are more complicated than the audience’s realizing which act was intended by the speaker. In any case, the argument I will offer here depends only on a very weak form of the uptake condition, a form that I think has substantial *prima facie* plausibility. I require only that speech acts of the sort I am interested in at least involve the *possibility* of uptake. See also Grünberg (2011) and Kukla (2014) for further discussion.

a refusal, and the woman would be deprived of an important ability—the ability to refuse sex.

We can construct a variation on Langton and Hornsby's form of argument to show that language loss involves a kind of illocutionary silencing. The argument is simple: as a language disappears, speech acts the last speakers might otherwise have realized in that language, as well as any candidate speech acts that survive in recorded form, are progressively undermined by the impossibility of uptake. When a language is gone, speech acts realizable only in that language are lost completely.

This means that speakers of threatened languages face a form of illocutionary silencing; some of the illocutionary acts that they would previously have been able to realize are undermined. If Spanish should disappear, no one would be able to recognize the self-conscious way in which Hernández exploits the *toro/torazo* alternation to make the expansion of the lyrical subject manifest on the page (or in speech). If English were to disappear, no one would be able to sell a chicken sandwich by rhyming 'fillet' with 'fill it'.

In a sense, then, we have already provided an answer to the question with which we began: what is lost when a language vanishes? The answer is: the class of speech acts whose realization depends on that language. There is, however, another sense in which this answer clearly falls short of what a reasonable expectation about the scope of the project would have been at the beginning. Saying that some speech acts are undermined by some set of circumstances is not, in and of itself, to say why anyone should care. To answer the question about language loss in a satisfying way, we must say something about why the kind of silencing involved is morally significant.

In the substantial literature that has been developed on the topic of illocutionary silencing, it has been widely recognized that some cases of silencing are morally significant while others are not. No one, for example, will be troubled by the fact that a child cannot place someone under arrest by saying 'You are under arrest', or by the fact that a parrot cannot void a contract by saying 'I hereby pronounce this contract void'.

So what makes some instances of silencing morally problematic and others not? Many discussions of the phenomenon are built around cases in which the speaker has a particularly fundamental interest in realizing the speech act or kind of speech act that is undermined. For example, in a passage that has become a touchstone in the literature

on the subject, Jacobson comments on the possibility that a woman's attempts to refuse sex go unrecognized as such:

What is so terrible about a woman's being unable to refuse sex is the disablement of her autonomy, the resulting violation of her body, and the assault on her well-being. (Jacobson 1995, p. 76)

Even where the stakes are lower, however, there is still room for silencing to count as problematic. For example, Maitra (2009) and Kukla (2014) have pointed out that the cases that are at issue in the silencing literature typically raise another sort of problem as well: they involve speakers whose illocutionary possibilities are comparatively limited with regard to those of other speakers in virtue of their identities as members of disadvantaged social groups.³³ While opinions vary about which kinds of group membership are relevant in this connection, and how exactly the notion of a comparative reduction in speech act force should be characterized, two cases from Maitra make the outlines of the approach clear:

Scenario 2: At a dinner party, the hostess presses a guest to help himself to more food. The guest is already full, and does not want any more. So he refuses the further helping. His hostess understands the conventional meaning of his utterance. But she also supposes that he is simply being polite, not wanting to appear too greedy. She supposes that good guests always say something similar when offered more food. As a result, she disregards his protests, and continues to press food on him, until he finally feels that he must give in.

Scenario 3: In a philosophy class, an African-American student offers a counter-example to a proposal the class is considering. The teacher understands the conventional meaning of his utterance. But given her beliefs about African-American students in general, she has low expectations of this student. In particular, she thinks that African-American students tend not to understand how philosophical arguments work. Accordingly, she fails to recognize his intention to offer a counter-example, and instead, re-explains the proposal to him. Later in the class, a white student re-states the same counter-example, and the teacher recognizes that it devastates the proposal. (Maitra 2009, pp. 15–16)

Maitra points out that the guest who is illocutionarily disempowered in virtue of his being a guest is disabled in virtue of a

³³ Although not explicitly concerned with the question of justice or injustice, Richmond (1996) offers another illuminating discussion of speech acts and the ways in which a speaker's illocutionary possibilities might depend on facts about her social position; significant portions of that discussion involve acts similar to those I have relied on to make my case here, acts whose nature depends on allusions, associations, and similar.

property he instantiates only in passing—the disempowerment ends with dinner. The student who is disempowered in virtue of being African-American, on the other hand, is disempowered in virtue of instantiating a stable social property, which means that the silencing is a pervasive feature of his experience as a speaker. Maitra observes, moreover, that a person has a degree of control over whether or not she becomes a guest that she does not have over whether or not she is racialized in a certain way. And many commentators have noted that the mechanisms that presumably underlie the illocutionary disempowerment of guests—considerations of politeness, and so on—do not raise questions of justice of the sort raised by the mechanisms that bring about the silencing of African-Americans.

My aim in the remainder of the paper will be to argue that illocutionary silencing of the sort suffered by the speakers of disappearing languages should qualify as morally objectionable along both of these axes. I will claim that the harm suffered by someone deprived of the ability to realize speech acts in her native language is particularly acute, since the fullest realization of a person's self-expression depends on her ability to select the speech acts she realizes with the fineness of grain that only a native speaker, speaking with other native speakers, can. In a fundamental sense, the decisions we make about how to speak constitute our social identities—so, to be deprived of the fineness of grain that one's native language allows one when selecting speech acts is to be deprived of something of tremendous importance. Furthermore, the kind of silencing that is involved in language loss affects people pervasively, in virtue of their belonging to a group (speaker of such-and-such a language) that they did not choose to belong to, and that is silenced for no obviously just reason.

To see the sense in which speakers of endangered languages suffer substantial harms, it will be helpful to consider similarities and differences with the case of a woman whose ability to refuse sex is undermined by pornography. In that case, a person's ability to realize a certain class of speech act is broadly undermined. Such illocutionary disablement counts as extremely significant, since people have a fundamental interest in being able to realize speech acts that concern basic questions about their bodily autonomy.

In the case of a person who speaks a language no one else speaks, things are different in important ways. If the last speaker of the disappearing language speaks another language as well, she will retain the ability to perform the same general types of speech acts—making assertions, granting permission, undertaking promises, and so on—that

everyone else can perform. What she loses is the ability to perform the full range of possible subtypes of these actions that she would have been able to perform prior to the loss of the language in question. Specifically, she loses the ability to perform the speech act subtypes that can only be performed in the lost language.

That loss, however, should nevertheless count as a substantial one. When two native speakers are part of a conversation, they recognize not just the broad moves that their interlocutors make (granting permission, undertaking a promise, and so on), they recognize that these high-level action types are performed *in such-and-such a particular way*. That is, interpreters recognize that, by using a certain word or expression that activates a certain set of associations with others, that encodes certain historical facts, and that sounds a certain way, speakers position themselves extremely precisely with regard to a huge range of possible speech act alternatives.

While the kind of silencing involved in language loss is not straightforwardly analogous to silencing as it has most prominently figured in the literature, there is an important similarity: both involve a loss of autonomy. If you accept that being able to express yourself in as subtle and fine-grained a way as language permits is a fundamental human interest, you should appreciate the pull of this argument, even without taking a position on the relative significance of that interest and your interest in bodily autonomy.

The sense in which a candidate speaker's expressive autonomy is a thing of fundamental value is perhaps easiest to see in the case of people whom we know to be deeply concerned with the mode of the expressions they produce. Consider Pushkin again. Even if we set aside the question of the aesthetic significance of his work, if we imagine that Pushkin were among the last speakers of Russian, we can see how significant a harm he would suffer in virtue of being cut off from the linguistic community on which his expressive abilities depend. In the poem we considered above, the lyrical subject states explicitly that the monument he creates by means of 'Exegi monumentum' will endure for as long as the Russian language does, and that his voice will echo wherever the language is spoken, 'by the proud progeny of the Slav, by the Finn, by the still-unbroken residents of the Tungus, and by the Kalmykian of the steppe'. In other words, if Russian should be lost, the speech act the poem realizes will be undermined, as its uptake conditions are left unsatisfiable, and the author's intention that it endure will be frustrated.

Of course, no speaker can reasonably expect that her speech acts will persist forever, and no speaker can reasonably expect to be understood by everyone everywhere. At the same time, however, it seems clear that speakers have a fundamental interest in being a part of a community in which they are able to grasp the full significance of the things people say to them, and to grasp the full significance of the things they say to others. Each of us has an interest, that is, in being able to express our thoughts, and in having others be able to grasp those thoughts, in their full subtlety and glory.³⁴

Our sense of who a person is—and other people's sense of who we are—depends in large part on the words we choose to express ourselves, and on the way in which we deliver those words. We exploit subtle facts about the relationship between the meaning of a word, patterns in its use, salient previous history, and similar, to send signals about the groups we take ourselves to belong to, the groups we aspire to belong to, the groups we would prefer not to be associated with, and so on. If someone wants to know how your date went, or your interview, they will ask, not just about the content of the messages transmitted, but about their form—‘Tell me exactly what they said!’ The same is true of many other linguistic interactions of various levels of importance, from speech at social events to political speech and speech that comes under scrutiny in a court of law.

To the extent that we care about the form of words we use to express ourselves, and thus about the degree of resolution with which we exert control over the public identity we assume, we should care that there be others around who recognize the choices we make in selecting those words; your jokes would not be the jokes they are (similarly in the case of your poignant eulogies or stirring rhetoric) were it not for the fact that there are people around who can

³⁴ Thanks to Eliot Michaelson for the ‘glory’ of this formulation. Anyone who speaks a foreign language will understand the discomfort of feeling not quite herself, of not quite being able to navigate as precisely as she would like. One way to put the present point, then, is to say that we all have an interest in being such that there is at least *some* community where we are not susceptible to this feeling—or at least no more susceptible than anyone else would be. Importantly, this is not to say that migrants everywhere should move home, or that there are not advantages to speaking a foreign language. The discomfort of feeling clumsy in a foreign language is at least sometimes counterbalanced by the exhilaration of feeling that you have managed to put the point exactly the way you wanted, even though the language is not your own. And we may very often have good reasons for choosing to live in a community in which we do not count as native speakers, and thus, as fully empowered linguistic actors. None of this changes the fact, however, that we still have a basic interest in the existence of such a community. We have an interest in having the *choice*, as it were, to be able to speak with a native voice.

understand them. The same point, of course, applies to current speakers of threatened languages. If such speakers ever care, for example, about the particular words or structures that form a story, then their ability to tell that story the way they want to is undercut by the loss of the language. Even if the story is not a precious cultural artefact, any would-be storyteller who finds her expressive repertoire restricted is harmed; we can imagine her saying 'It just isn't quite the same in English' (or Spanish, or Bahasa Indonesia, or whatever).

Turning our attention now to the second sense in which cases of silencing have been taken to be problematic, consider some of the parallels between the kind of silencing that is at stake in the case of language loss and the kind of silencing to which Maitra's African-American student is subjected. If a speaker should lose the ability to realize speech acts that depend on the particular features of her heritage language, that loss would obviously be permanent and systematic. She not only loses the ability to perform a specific class of speech act, or to perform a specific class of speech act in a certain restricted set of contexts, she loses the ability to perform *any* act that depends on her heritage language, in *any* context. If a person is permanently and systematically silenced in virtue of belonging to a certain group, that is, in virtue of being a native member of a certain linguistic community, she is silenced in virtue of a property over which she has no control. Although the possibility of migration offers us at least some freedom to choose whether we live in a society in which our native language or another language is the predominant one, we have no control over which language we were raised in. Silencing that a person suffers in virtue of belonging to a particular heritage linguistic community is unlikely to be morally defensible in the way that, say, preventing a child from undertaking contractual commitments would be. And the background social conditions that are implicated in language loss are unlikely to have obtained by just means.³⁵

Before closing, I want to consider an objection that takes the form of an overgeneration worry: if language extinction involves problematic silencing in the way we have claimed here, should we not say the

³⁵ As noted at the outset, language loss generally affects communities of relatively low social power and prestige; we can recognize this without being forced to claim that the harm involved in silencing just is the harm of being generally less socially powerful than someone else—the harm the African-American student suffers by illocutionary disablement is distinct from any harm suffered by the unjust social order that contributed to producing the disablement. Similarly, the harm suffered by silenced speakers of a disappearing language is distinct from whatever other political and economic injustices they are likely to have suffered.

same about language change over time, or even about dialectal differences at a single time?

Suppose it is true that certain speech acts depend on the highly specific constellation of metadata associated with the expressions and syntactic structures used to realize them, and on speakers' and listeners' mutual knowledge of such. In that case, it seems obvious that language change will bring with it a reshaping of the realm of possibilities; acts that could have been realized using a certain form of words might no longer be realizable, and speakers who have failed to keep up with the times might find their intended speech acts misfiring.

Indeed, once we begin to track speech acts at the level of resolution I have argued for here, it becomes difficult to avoid the conclusion that the question of which possibilities are available to speakers in a given moment will depend on their specific backgrounds and the backgrounds of their audiences. Within London alone, to say nothing of the wider UK, much less the Anglophone world generally, dialects vary so much that there can hardly be any guarantee that the significance of all of a speaker's lexical or syntactic choices, or her choices about inflection or whatever else, will be recognized in the way the speaker herself might expect or wish them to be.

The right response to these facts is to acknowledge that linguistic variation, whether over time or over geographic or sociocultural space, will sometimes foreclose speech act possibilities, while denying that the corresponding reductions in speakers' illocutionary repertoires are problematic in the way that the silencing engendered by language extinction is. While there is no space here to consider all of the issues raised by linguistic variation, it will be worth taking a moment to distinguish the cases, in order to resist a possible *reductio* of the position developed so far in the paper.

Although I would hesitate to commit myself to any very precise claims about the measures involved, it seems clear that we can talk sensibly, even if only roughly, about the proportion of a speaker's expressive inventory that counts as 'live' in a given context, and thus about the speaker's degree of freedom to manoeuvre through the speech act space afforded by her language. Along similar lines, we can reasonably ask whether a certain speaker ever has access to a population of speakers with whom she can engage 'in full colour', as it were, and we can ask how often a speaker has such access and how difficult it is.

Along both of these axes, the situation of someone like Amadeo García García, the last surviving speaker of Taushiro, is fundamentally different from the situation of a speaker most comfortable in Multicultural London English who ends up stuck next to a Rees-Mogg at an event, or someone who tells dad jokes without meaning to because he has lost track of the current argot.³⁶

First of all, while some of the subtleties of the MLE speaker's idiom may be lost on certain interpreters, it is a happy fact about the world that we do not have to spend all of our time in conversation with Rees-Moggs. As long as we have access to some community of people we can engage with who are capable of recognizing the linguistic moves we make for what they are, we are in a substantially better position than someone like García, for whom such engagement is simply impossible.

Second, even where dialectal gaps due to time, space, social differences, and so on, loom largest, it seems plausible to assume that the shared space of possibilities that each party to a conversation will recognize is wider than the space of possibilities that they will not. So even if I cannot express myself with the fullest fidelity when talking to someone whose background is substantially different from my own, if we both speak English, I take it that I can nevertheless manoeuvre much more adeptly (and be recognized as so doing) than I can in even a foreign language that I know well.

Finally, where dialectal differences are concerned, the gaps in speakers' understandings of one another can be remedied relatively straightforwardly. Simply by encountering and attending to the behaviour of speakers of a different dialect, whether in person or through media visibility, we can expand the range of speech act signals we track, and thus expand the range of distinctions we are capable of recognizing.

4. Conclusion

None of the foregoing is meant to show that a restriction in a speaker's expressive repertoire is the worst thing that can happen to her, or that there are not other bad consequences associated with language loss. The argument does not aim to establish that we should preserve languages at all cost, or that the people who are silenced in the way

³⁶ García's case was described in the *New York Times* by Nicholas Casey (2017). For a survey introduction to Multicultural London English, see Cheshire, Hall and Adger (2017).

described should commit themselves to preserving their heritage languages.³⁷ Indeed, the argument does not even exhaust the range of plausible harms that might be occasioned by the kind of illocutionary silencing that we have focused on here.³⁸ Nevertheless, I think that there is something importantly right about the answer described here to the question of what is at stake where languages are endangered.

Although substantial further work will admittedly be required to fully flesh out and defend the position sketched here, I hope that what has been done so far will suggest that it will be fruitful to consider the question of language loss from the perspective of a certain sort of fine-grained approach to speech acts. The examples upon which my discussion is based reveal that in many cases, our expressive capabilities depend on particular features of the languages we speak—the things I can do, as it were, are shaped by the tools that the history of the language has placed at my disposal. If that is right, then when a language disappears, so does a range of possible actions. If we accept that people have a fundamental interest in being part of a community in which the same basic stock of tools is available to everyone, and thus of being part of a community in which each has the ability fully to realize herself linguistically, we have a reason to lament the loss of a language.³⁹

³⁷ Importantly, while some speakers of threatened or vanishing languages lament that state of affairs, it is hardly the case that all do.

³⁸ As Véronique Munoz-Dardé has pointed out to me, and as the Editors have noted as well, even if the arguments made here are successful, they appear to miss an intuitive sense in which the problems raised by language loss go beyond the harms that accrue to individual speakers. If we focused our attention only on those harms, it might seem as though the best thing to do in the face of the kind of considerations advanced here would be not to aim to preserve languages or celebrate linguistic diversity, but to prevent silencing by helping communities transition more quickly to dominant languages. In future work, I hope to be able to say more about the sense in which we all lose something when we find ourselves in a world of comparatively fewer expressive possibilities.

³⁹ I would like to thank Simona Aimar, Alex Barber, Nicholas Gooding, Rebecca Harrison, Mike Martin, Eliot Michaelson, Véronique Munoz-Dardé, Robert Stainton, and Kevin Toh for helpful comments and discussion. The Editors have provided particularly detailed feedback on the manuscript, for which I am very grateful, and two anonymous referees have also gone far beyond the usual standard in their comments. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the particularly fundamental influence of Lyubov Golburt and Anna Muza, without whose patience and encouragement this work would not have been possible, and Ekaterina Ignatova, who helped me to take my first steps in this terrain. Parts of this project were supported by a US Department of Education Foreign Language and Area Studies fellowship and a US Department of State Fulbright Student Research Fellowship.

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